



Breaking up with your Bad Habits

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We all have them. And we wish we had never developed them in the first place. I am talking about our bad habits, which could be biting our nails, eating when we are upset, smoking, procrastinating, lying on the couch when we should be doing exercise, etc. Bad habits prevent us from accomplishing our goals and interfere with our lives. They can jeopardize our physical and mental health and they are mostly a waste of time and energy.

So why don't we get rid of them? The most common answer is that it is too difficult. Now it is true that the more you have practiced your bad habit the harder it is to extinguish, because quite simply, every time you engage in the habit you strengthen that particular neural pathway in the brain creating an automatic behaviour you don't think about. However you can break your bad habits. When you stop engaging in the behaviour the neural pathway weakens. When you learn a new good habit, you create a new neural pathway.

Below are a number of tried and tested steps. There are a lot of steps and you don't have to do them all. Some will work for you and others won't. Try them out and come up with a habit breaking strategy that works for you.

Changing your Thinking

1. Commit to a goal. Create a specific goal to stop engaging in your bad habit or change it to a better habit. By setting a goal you are indicating a desire and commitment to change. If you are half-hearted about breaking a habit you won't succeed.
2. Make conscious what is happening before, during, and after engaging in the habit. What triggers your bad habit? Are you bored, stressed, upset, angry? Is fear causing you to engage in your bad habit? When you notice what your triggers are you can often find ways to stop. If you always smoke when you go into a bar then don't go into a bar. If you eat chocolate when you are upset then don't keep chocolate in your home or office.
3. Log how often you engage in your bad habit. Measuring something helps to make you more aware of what you are doing?
4. List the pros and cons of your bad habit and put the list up where you can read it often.
5. All of our habits serve some purpose. There is some payoff we get for engaging in our bad habits or we wouldn't do them. Once you know what need is met when you engage in your bad habit you can find a better way to get that need met. If smoking helps you deal with stress, then find a better way to de-stress.
6. It is easier to replace a bad habit with a new habit than to just try and get rid of the old habit. Find a new good habit you want to replace your bad habit.
7. Visualise yourself succeeding - often. It is easier to effect a behaviour if we have rehearsed it in our mind. Imagine yourself not engaging in your bad habit. See yourself substituting a new good habit for the old bad one.

8. Write a script of your desired actions with your new habit and without your bad habit and read it everyday.
9. Write an action plan. This can include actions to: Reduce spending time in situations that trigger your bad habit, practicing new actions to create a better habit, ways in which you will monitor your progress, how you will hold yourself accountable and reward your successes. Plan to allow for mistakes. If you give up after one slip up you are doomed. You will slip up. You are human. Accept in advance that you will slip up and when it happens get back on track as soon as you can.

Changing your Behaviour

1. Implement your plan. Cut out as many triggers as possible. Start practicing the new habit. Consciously and very deliberately practice new behaviours.
2. Change your environment and your activities so you are not tempted to resort to your bad habits. Don't keep junk food at home. Make friends and spend time with non-smokers. Your old habits are associated with familiar places. In new places it is harder for your brain to slip into automatic behaviours.
3. Create barriers. For example tell people to call you out when you engage in your bad habit. Get someone to hide your cigarettes. Put something that tastes awful in your drink. Tell yourself that if you eat that extra piece of cake you need to exercise for 10 minutes more.
4. Start small and be specific. Instead of saying I will stop procrastinating say I will work for 30 minutes nonstop. Set 10 minutes for exercise initially rather than one hour. This works best when breaking the habit seems a daunting task.
5. Some people suggest placing a large rubber band around your wrist and every time you become aware that you are engaging in a bad habit you snap it.
6. Join forces with someone. Pair up and quit the bad habit together. You can hold one another accountable and celebrate successes together.
7. Make friends with and spend time with people who don't have your bad habit.
8. Reward your successes.
9. If you slip up then start again. Don't start saying, "See its never going to work".
10. Be patient. Behavioural conditioning takes time. The first few days may be the hardest and there will definitely be times when it is particularly difficult to keep going. Such as when you have a really lousy day.
11. Be nice to yourself and watch your self-talk. Beating yourself up for slipping up will make you want to give up. Telling yourself it is hard just makes it harder. Tell yourself that you can do it. When the going gets tough remind yourself what life will be like in the future when you no longer have this bad habit.

Change one habit at a time. If your habit is one you cannot seem to break on your own and it is dangerous such as self-harming, substance abuse or an eating disorder, get professional help. Breaking bad habits takes time and effort, but mostly it take perseverance. Most people who break bad habits fail many times before they get it right. You might not have success right away, but you can still have success.